

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

22 NOV 1983

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

9 November 1983

Problems and Prospects of a New Succession [redacted]

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Summary

Soviet party leader Yuriy Andropov's absence from this year's anniversary ceremonies in Moscow--no General Secretary has missed them in 30 years or more--is almost certainly due to a worsening of his physical health. His frail health in fact has been evident from the outset of his tenure, and given rise to speculation that the regime could face a new succession at any time. [redacted]

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SOVA M 83-10196

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Domestic Issues Branch, Policy Analysis Division, Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and queries may be addressed to the Chief, Policy Analysis Division [redacted]

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There are good reasons for Soviet concern over succession: sickness, death, and the consequences of earlier political battles have so reduced leadership ranks that the regime appears less prepared for a new succession than it was when Brezhnev died last year. Moreover, no likely candidate, starting from among the senior party secretaries--Chernenko, Gorbachev and Romanov--and including the dark horses Ustinov and Grishin now seems to have a better than fifty-fifty chance to be selected. This situation strongly suggests that the next succession will be more controversial and tumultuous than the last one. Each of the best placed candidates--senior secretaries Chernenko, Gorbachev, and Romanov--have significant political liabilities, and Andropov's seeming support for Gorbachev will not be much help once he is dead.

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Perhaps it will take a little longer than usual, but a new leader will emerge within a matter of days. No new leader is likely to have the power, authority, and prestige that Andropov had when he gained the post and any new leader after Andropov is likely to encounter more difficulty in consolidating his position. As a result the possibility of protracted turmoil within the leadership cannot be ruled out.

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The Potential for an Early Succession. Although Yuriy Andropov has been party chief for only a year, his advanced age and uncertain health have raised questions among Soviets and Westerners alike about the length of his tenure. Indeed the illness that prevented Andropov from attending the revolution ceremonies in early November--Khrushchev and Brezhnev never failed to attend--points to the Soviet leadership predicament. Andropov took office at age 68 (he is now 69)--almost 10 years later in life than any of his predecessors. While the specific nature of his current health problems is unknown--the official explanation that he has a cold is almost certainly a false understatement of the problem.

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[redacted] whatever the exact nature of the problem there is no doubt that his health is frail.

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At the same time his political position remains solid: Andropov is treated deferentially by his Politburo colleagues, he has the most authoritative voice in the leadership (while out of sight this fall his remarks on the KAL shootdown and INF were prominently published in the Soviet media), and he was accorded top leadership status in the displays of leader portraits and slogans during the November anniversary

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ceremonies. Moreover, there is no evidence of organized opposition to his role in the Politburo. [REDACTED]

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While Andropov has from the outset seemed politically healthy, concern about his physical status began the day of Brezhnev's funeral and has heightened since then. During the June 1983 visit to Moscow of Finnish President Koivisto, for example, Finnish officials were surprised that Soviet authorities permitted Andropov to appear before the foreign press, an appearance which highlighted his poor condition. Another example of Andropov's physical weakness occurred the following month, when a long-scheduled meeting between Andropov and West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl had to be delayed because of Andropov's health. Even Soviet propagandists have been unable to show Andropov in good physical form. A US Embassy officer who saw a Soviet documentary film on Andropov that was released to movie theaters this summer reported that, despite the film's efforts to portray Andropov in the most favorable terms, he came across as a very sick man. Andropov's twelve week absence from public view since late summer has also served to raise doubts about his health status. He postponed a planned trip to Bulgaria, reportedly called off a planned Warsaw Pact Summit meeting, and the fall meetings of the Central Committee and Supreme Soviet remain unscheduled possibly because of Andropov's uncertain health status. [REDACTED]

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Soviet officials in Moscow and abroad have been openly discussing Andropov's health during the past year, indicating that it has become a subject of concern at least within the middle level of the the bureaucracy.

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These perceptions, if widely shared in the bureaucracy, likely have slowed Andropov's effort to consolidate his position and could increase his vulnerability to political challenge. There is no question, moreover, that Andropov's long absence this fall has hurt his chances to push in new policy directions. [REDACTED]

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Unprepared for Succession. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the Politburo is haunted by the question of succession and hard pressed to decide who from among its ranks could fill the position of General Secretary if Andropov leaves the scene. Sickness, death and the consequences of earlier political battles have so reduced leadership ranks that the regime appears less prepared for a new succession than it was when Brezhnev died last November. For example, without Andropov the party will have the smallest Politburo since the early 1950s, and there is no leader in the Secretariat who has experience comparable to that of Khrushchev, Brezhnev, or even Andropov. Moreover, when Brezhnev died there were at least two leaders well placed (holding membership in both the Politburo and Secretariat) and with the requisite experience to become General Secretary: Andropov, who had been moved to the Secretariat several months before Brezhnev's death; and Brezhnev's protege, Konstantin Chernenko. Chernenko, however, has suffered health problems during the past year. [REDACTED]

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Role of the Politburo and Key Leaders. The succession decision is most likely to be made in the Politburo by the senior core of remaining leaders: Senior Secretaries Chernenko, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Grigoriy Romanov, Premier Nikolay Tikhonov, Defense Minister Dmitriy Ustinov, Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko, Moscow party boss Viktor Grishin and Ukrainian Party Chief Vladimir Shcherbitskiy. It will be in the interest of these leaders to move quickly in order to avoid conflict and political paralysis and to project an image of decisiveness abroad. While a coalition could form "in the corridor" before a formal Politburo meeting, all 10 remaining full Politburo members will have a vote on the succession question. Only if the Politburo is unable to reach a consensus would the decision shift to the more than 300 voting member Central Committee. If the Central Committee gets involved in the decision, support for individual leaders among

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Central Committee members especially from key oblast party officials, would become very important in the selection process. [redacted]

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Best Placed Candidates. Precedent suggests that Andropov's successor will come from the party secretaries who hold voting membership in the Politburo--criteria met now only by Chernenko, Gorbachev and Romanov. Chernenko, now 72 and in ill health must be considered a candidate for Andropov's job, but he has significant liabilities as well as some strengths. He was passed over last time reportedly because he lacked support from such key leaders as Ustinov and Gromyko, both of whom continue to be important players in the Politburo. Indeed, Chernenko's star seemed to fade soon after Andropov took office although he has maintained the nominal number two position in the party. Chernenko was absent during April and May for apparent health reasons--he probably cannot be counted on to be in political life for a long period--and appeared to have been slighted in some of the Soviet press treatment of the June Supreme Soviet session and party plenum. Moreover, during Andropov's absence for vacation and health reasons, Chernenko was said [redacted] to be sharing party oversight responsibilities with others, a sign [redacted] that he was not fully trusted in the top supervisory role. [redacted]

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There is more recent evidence, however, of a minor political comeback for Chernenko. Over the past few weeks his public level of activity has picked up: he has met with the Mexican Communist Party leader, Algerian officials, and Czech propagandists; he attended a conference of bloc party officials in Moscow and published articles in prominent ideological journals. The strongest signal that he remains an important factor in the leadership--and hence in the succession--is the highlighting of his position as unofficial party second-in-command at the recent anniversary ceremonies. [redacted]

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Chernenko still has the same liabilities that prevented his selection last time, plus the further problem of ill health--indeed there would probably be reluctance to elect another sick man. Assuming that he does not have a life threatening disease such as cancer, however, he could be the choice of those in the Politburo who are reluctant or unable to choose among the other younger and better qualified for the job. Moreover, the younger contenders might not even fight him for the job, if they perceive him as a weak and short term

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prospect whose tenure would enable them to build strength for the future. These are admittedly poor reasons to select Chernenko, and the odds are less than fifty-fifty now that he would emerge on top in a succession. [redacted]

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Gorbachev's prospects have improved in recent months apparently because Andropov has consciously expanded his responsibilities in the leadership. Indeed, a Soviet Embassy officer in Belgrade [redacted]

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[redacted] told a US official in August that Andropov wants Gorbachev anointed as number two in the party. The diplomat also stated that Gorbachev's high visibility reflected an expanding portfolio that includes economic matters, agriculture, cadre policy and ideology. [redacted]

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Soviets touting Gorbachev may be drawing conclusions from public events that suggest the scope of Gorbachev's activities, in fact, is growing. For example, Gorbachev presided at the appointments of two officials in July, served as master of ceremonies at a prestigious gathering of party veterans with Andropov in August, and that same month opened a Central Committee conference on cadres. In September he also attended a meeting on Soviet education--a new task for him. Gorbachev is also aided by his youth and apparent good health. Irrespective of Gorbachev's new responsibilities his agricultural portfolio alone gives him much political clout. He deals with numerous oblast and kray party first secretaries from farm areas, and, by his own count, oversees 15 ministries that are responsible for more than two-fifths of Soviet GNP.

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Gorbachev's expanding role in the leadership does not now easily convert into additional political muscle for him. So far, under Andropov, Gorbachev has presided over only two important personnel shifts and in neither case were "his" people installed. In short, Gorbachev has not had enough time to make the cadre function work for him. Moreover, Gorbachev probably cannot count on the support of the important heavy industry, defense and military constituencies in a succession fight. In this sense, Gorbachev's political base is more narrow than it might seem from the growing scope of his public activities. Lastly, while Gorbachev is helped by Andropov's

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support, such support will not help after Andropov's passing unless he does more for him while he is on top. [REDACTED]

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Romanov's prospects, on the other hand, are probably better than they appear on the surface. While he has had little visibility since becoming a party secretary, and his portfolio is more narrow than Gorbachev's--he evidently is responsible for heavy and defense industry--Romanov is probably perceived by the more conservative elements in the party as the better choice. For example, Romanov has had experience as a manager of a key regional party organization with strong ties to the industrial and military sector. Moreover, Romanov is an ideological conservative who has taken a harder line than many of his colleagues on foreign policy issues. In a time of troubles for the USSR at home and abroad, the Soviet leaders after Andropov may look to the more conservative candidate as the better choice. [REDACTED]

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Romanov, in fact, has been considered a succession candidate for over a decade, ever since then kingmaker Mikhail Suslov installed him as Leningrad party leader in 1970. Since then he has been restless with ambition, generating recurrent rumors that he would be transferred to Moscow as either a party secretary or Premier. After Andropov took office he began to receive broader exposure in the leadership (his attendance in April at the Karl Marx commemoration in Berlin was seen in this context). Moreover, Romanov sat with Andropov and Gorbachev at the meeting of party veterans in August and recently was referred to favorably in remarks by a regional party leader. [REDACTED]

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His arrogant personality and open political self-promotion as well as stories regarding his scandalous behavior that have been circulating in the Soviet Union probably account for current perceptions among some Soviet observers--including a Soviet Embassy officer in Belgrade [REDACTED] that he has limitations as a politician. Some foreign observers, such as our Consul General in Leningrad, on the other hand, now speak of a more sophisticated Romanov who is trying to pose as a gentleman on his best behavior. More importantly, according to both US and Canadian Ambassadors to Moscow, Romanov in recent exchanges has appeared to have a good grasp of the main issues--this contrasts with his earlier performance where he seemed to be ignorant of some of the basics. [REDACTED]

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Dark Horses. None of the senior secretaries is an ideal candidate:

- o Gorbachev, 52, may be viewed as too junior, both in age and experience, for the top party job and may lack support from the military-industrial sector.
- o Romanov, 60, has served only a short time as a national party secretary (since June 1983) and has a reputation for roughness that might not serve him well. His tendency in the past to frequently shuffle cadres may also be cause for concern among party bureaucrats.
- o Chernenko seems to have few pluses--he probably is not the choice of the military-security constituents--other than his presence in the leadership. [REDACTED]

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The lack of ideal candidates for the General Secretary position could lead the Politburo to turn to others outside the Secretariat, such as Ustinov, Grishin, or Shcherbitskiy. Such a course is unprecedented. Former Azerbaijan party leader Geydar Aliyev, brought to Moscow under Andropov as a full Politburo member and First Deputy Premier, is also a dark horse candidate [REDACTED]

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- o Ustinov has the advantages of past experience in the Secretariat (1965-76) and service in the important military sector. At age 75, however, he is the second oldest full member of the Politburo and has suffered from poor health. Nonetheless, if the regime wanted to send a signal that things are under control while recognizing that only an interim choice has been made, they could take the unprecedented step of selecting outside the Secretariat and pick Ustinov. Such a compromise choice would be only a first step, however, in a more protracted, potentially more controversial succession.
- o Grishin had been mentioned by Soviet officials as a possible "compromise candidate" during the previous succession and could become one this time around. Located in Moscow, he has a definite political advantage over his other regionally based colleagues. However, he too is handicapped by health problems, and is not part of the Andropov coalition.
- o Shcherbitskiy is probably the most influential leader outside Moscow and has extensive experience in economic management. His continued failure to move to a national-level position, however, is still a serious

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handicap for him. Moreover, some Soviet officials who have touted him in the past, now state that Shcherbitskiy will remain on the margins of power.

- o Aliyev is known for his political ambition and ability to shift loyalties to get ahead. For that reason, however, he may not be trusted by his colleagues. As a Muslim, moreover, he probably would not be considered acceptable for the top party post by the Slavic majority in the party. [redacted]

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After Andropov? Even if we could positively identify the next leader--and Gorbachev and Romanov seem to be frontrunners--his present views insofar as we could discern them, probably would give us at best only a general sense of the direction Soviet policy would take in the immediate post-Andropov period. These views probably would be modified as he attempted to gain support and even further altered by political calculations, the exigencies of events, and the broader perspective of his new post (witness foreign policy specialist Andropov's concentration on economic problems). [redacted]

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As of now, the younger candidates to succeed Andropov--Gorbachev and Romanov--seem to share Andropov's basic domestic policy views. Both men probably view Soviet economic problems as heading the domestic agenda; both are strong advocates of discipline and greater efficiency in labor and production; and both are vigorous leaders who seem open to innovation experimentation and change, albeit within strict ideological bounds. Romanov, an inveterate ideological conservative, sharply cracked down on dissidents as Leningrad leader. Gorbachev, in contrast, at least appears to be more pragmatic and could be more flexible, less doctrinaire, in the ideological and social sphere. Chernenko's views on Soviet domestic issues are more widely known than those of his younger colleagues in the Secretariat. He has long advocated investment in consumer goods sectors, greater attention to the social factor in domestic affairs and has stressed traditional solutions to economic problems. In recent pronouncements in the ideological sphere, however, he has taken a more conservative line. [redacted]

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In the foreign policy sphere, certain stylistic differences seem apparent within the party Secretariat. Gorbachev, although lacking in foreign policy experience, projected an image of quiet self-assurance, flexibility, pragmatism and intelligence during his recent trip to Canada. By contrast, Romanov, with over 20 foreign trips and

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fairly wide contact with foreign diplomats over the years, has far greater experience in foreign affairs. In their published statements, Romanov has taken a harder line than Gorbachev on foreign policy issues. During his May 1983 visit to Canada Gorbachev hewed closely to the established foreign policy line in both public and private remarks. Romanov's remarks in the foreign policy area have tended to focus on arms control issues and seems to evince a special interest in US-Soviet relations. While most of his public remarks have taken a hardline, ideological stance, he has posed on occasion as a partisan of better relations with the United States in private. Chernenko's public remarks during the Brezhnev era were more enthusiastic than most other Soviet leaders in his support of improved relations with the West, particularly the United States, and of arms limitation. In the likely crisis atmosphere of an early Andropov succession, however, no new leader could afford to look weak or indecisive and neither could he retreat from any perceived challenge to Soviet interests abroad. [REDACTED]

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Collectivity to the Fore. If the succession occurred soon no new leader is likely to have the power, authority, and prestige that Andropov had when he gained the post and any of the above candidates would probably encounter more difficulty in consolidating his position. The presence of strong political rivals from the outset--something that Andropov has not had to face--would particularly make the maneuvering in the Politburo intense and the new General Secretary's position more vulnerable. The age structure of the Politburo might allow a younger candidate to consolidate power sooner, as older members die off, but rivalry among younger leaders would also intensify. [REDACTED]

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